



Edit Antal*

Being Neighbors with a Colossus The Case of the Arctic: Climate Change and Geopolitics

Canada and Mexico are both neighbors with a colossus, the United States, in one case to the south and in the other to the north. This always creates a certain ambiguity, more pronounced in Mexico's case, given the history of interventions and cultural differences, whose enormous complexity, though widely analyzed, will not be the subject of this article. Here, we will center on the fact that being neighbors with a colossus is also Canada's reality. This has consequences, which manifest themselves in the constant need to reaffirm its identity, to attempt to differentiate itself, thus underlining its right to exist and its sovereignty at the same time that it more or less supports or trusts its neighbor's strength.

That is, it must simultaneously differentiate and identify itself. The United States' proximity and influence undoubtedly represent security, strength, and backing for Canada both economically and militarily. The ambiguity is clearly reflected in some of my research about climate change and the so-called issue of the North, the case of the Arctic that I will develop here.

In terms of identity, generally, if someone is at the center of an entity, culture, or civilization, everything is clear and there is no need to reaffirm oneself, to constantly insist on his/her otherness. However, when one is on the border, the picture changes and defending one's identity often becomes a vital, ever-present task. This is more pressing in Canada's case than Mexico's because from many angles (level and kind of development, origins, history, and language), the similarities seem to be much greater than the differences.

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In Canada, the so-called issue of the North is closely related to identity and with the need to reconcile preserving nature with the appetite for exploiting natural resources to find a healthy, convenient balance. This task is closely related to climate change management. Curiously, in Canada, this is not perceived only as a threat or a risk, but also as an economic advantage that makes it possible to expand productive activities into the North, thus promising greater profits.

The Case of the Arctic

For Canada, the issue of the Arctic and the so-called “question of the North” has many facets: security, economics, environment, climate change, culture and ethnicity, and, even, importantly, national identity. It also has two dimensions: the local and the global levels. The accelerated impacts of climate change and the world's changing geopolitics make the Arctic and the North in general increasingly attractive economically and strategically, and just as disputed.

The Arctic includes a region covering parts of Europe, Asia, and America. It is highly fragile and vulnerable, which climate change has accelerated. In addition, it houses 25 percent of the world's gas and oil; it holds third place in diamond deposits and possesses coal and basic rare and precious metals. We can see a vicious circle here: global warming increasingly permits growing economic activity at the same time that it speeds up the melting of ice caps and the propagation of greenhouse gases. It is difficult to slow economic expansion because it generates a lot of profit, and that economic value is growing at the same rate as the temperature. The resulting economic benefits can be considered very high in terms of opening up the North to business, which makes it attractive for investment and promises big earnings for companies, as well as new sources of employment.

For Canada, this represents a geopolitical battle today and in the not-too-distant future. Domestically, there is a clash of interests between the actors who benefit and the damage done by climate change. Internationally, this has given rise to a high-level dispute in which the main protagonists are none others than Russia, the United States, and China, and even though China actually has no ability to exert power in the Arctic, it has taken that position *motu proprio* given its proximity to the region.

As mentioned above, in the Arctic, global warming is up to four times as fast as in the rest of the world. In the twentieth-century, temperatures soared by five degrees, and in the next 100 years, an additional four- to seven-degree rise is expected. This has been manifested in the swift melting of the polar ice cap and the thinning—an even the disappearance—of the whole ice sheet. By the middle of our century, it is believed that there could be 125 days without ice, when currently there are only fifty. Economic interests in Canada often see this environmental impact, considered catastrophic for the planet, as something positive, since it would increase the region's accessibility, the establishment of new trade routes, and exploration of energy and mineral resources.

Climate scientists warn that these impacts show dangerous signs: the velocity of warming surpasses local ecosystems' capacity for natural adaptation; we are reaching the threshold of inflexion for the ocean's ice, Greenland's ice sheet, the sub-Arctic forests, communities of plankton, and permafrost, among others. Given this panorama, Canada has not been pro-active. We can say that its climate change policy has been marginal regarding energy and that it is discussed more in terms of competitiveness than of the environment. For its part, the different provinces have historically been obstructionist on this issue, because federal measures have affected them disproportionately as they are excluded from the applicable instruments.

Identity

In her book *International Disputes and Cultural Ideas in the Canadian Arctic: Arctic Sovereignty in the National Consciousness* (2018), Danita Catherine Burke deals with arctic sovereignty in the collective Canadian imagination. She analyzes the main narratives about the Arctic: romantic, economic, and security-centered, in both their military

and environmental dimensions. In accordance with the constructivist conception, this approach helps a great deal to understand the limits of the strategies and policies regarding the Arctic in Canada. Despite the fact that the immense majority of Canadians do not live or work in the North, much less in the Arctic, and we can suppose, therefore, that they are unfamiliar with it, in the collective imagination, it turns out to be a powerful factor that impacts beliefs and attitudes such as those involving life, the economy, security, international conflicts, and the environment. In southern Canada, it is not unusual to see signs in windows with the phrase, “We the North.”

We can say that throughout history, the Arctic and the North in general have formed an essential part of Canadian identity, and its importance in the definition of the nation has been widely recognized and documented. The idea of the North is considered a Canadian myth; and, as we know, without myths, nations can die. It is particularly important for the objectives of this article to underline that the romantic notion of the Arctic has been useful for Canada to differentiate itself from the United States, which also possesses a part of the Arctic, though that in no way is part of its national identity.

In *Canada and the Idea of North* (2001), Sherril E. Grace argues in detail that Canadians have always promoted the idea of Canada as the North, as a symbol of purity, magnetism, and home, and even when this belief is not convincing or is even contradictory, it has served to foster a distinctive national identity and even configures national unity. Grace maintains that, with the enigmatic expressions “the North” or “true North strong and free,” Canadians’ meaning constantly changes, and it actually can be located anywhere in the country, since the North is, at the same time an idea and a region that can be mapped and measured in terms of “northernness.”

Environmental and Military Security

People have tried to maintain Canada’s image as a country that protects the environment, despite a series of clearly negative episodes. Outstanding among these, for example, is its unprecedented exit from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

In the North, the economic narrative has become stronger and stronger since oil was discovered in Alaska

The romantic invocations of Canada and their weight in the definition of its national identity seem to contradict the relative neglect of the defense of its residents, territory, and environment.

in 1968, and the United States attempted to transport it through the Arctic’s Northwest. The control of the Northwest Passage constitutes one of the most complex controversies between Canada and the rest of the Arctic countries. At the end of the twentieth century, interest in the region had grown due to the effects of climate change, and one of the most important consequences of the resulting glacier melting will be the possibility to safely and continuously navigate the strait known as the Northwest Passage, which is calculated to be possible approximately in 2030.

Two dimensions can be identified regarding security: the military and the environmental. The former is linked to the idea of the defense of sovereignty and indirectly to that of property also, as well as to the presence of nuclear warheads and submarines. The second dimension, in contrast, involves pollution, oil spills, and, again, climate change. Historically, Canadian governments have associated security with the armed forces, which, in this narrative, has justified earmarking bigger military spending in the Arctic.

Internationally, we can summarize by saying that in general Canada has not been a protagonist in the region. For reasons probably linked to power, when controversies arise, Canada has always come down on the side of the United States. This is despite its generally having a foreign policy led by liberal ideology and multilateralism, explained not only by its military weakness, but also by its determination to avoid a clash with its more powerful neighbor.

Today’s Challenge

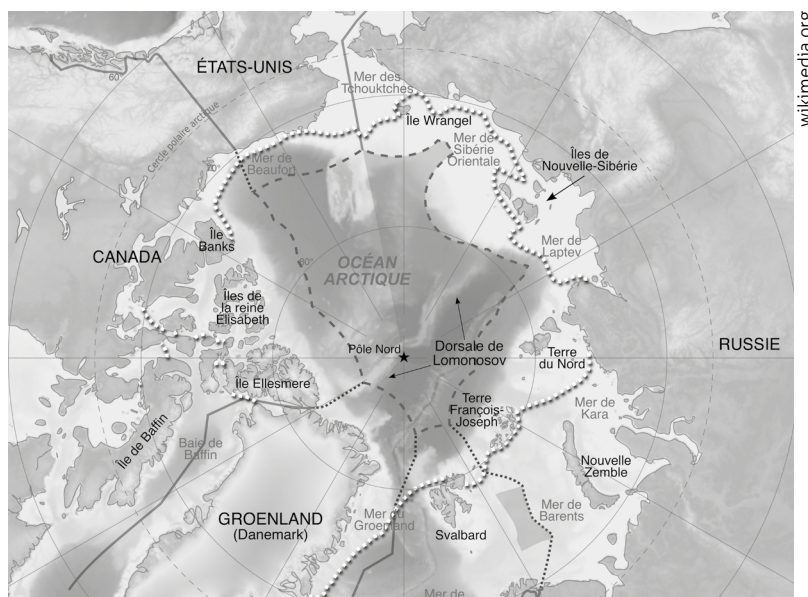
To situate Canada’s international circumstances in the region, we must point out that it is one of the eight countries surrounding the Arctic, together with the United States, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland, where approximately four million people live,

half a million indigenous. In representation of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and the Yukon, Canada and the seven other countries are members of the Arctic Council, founded in Ottawa in 1996, the only intergovernmental forum that discusses its members' common issues. The council also includes a series of non-Arctic observer states, among them China and other Asian and European governments.

The issue of identity, cultivated and associated with Canada's Arctic region, clearly exercises a strong influence on the way the state formulates its international positions in the region, molded into its foreign policy agenda. We can say that Canada has generally neglected the region in terms of development and defense, given that it has focused on the South's priorities, where most of the population lives and a large part of its economic activity is centered. However, recently, and above all today, as the third year of war between Russia and the Ukraine begins, we could suppose that Canada's biggest conflict in the Arctic would precisely be with Russia. The latter, which encompasses a large part of the Arctic territory and coast, has long had a tense relationship with Canada given its constant and increasingly intense activities in the region.

This panorama, together with the deepening of relations between Russia and China, particularly in the Arctic region, can be seen in the presence of a growing number of warships and is a concern for Canada. Concretely, it is a matter of ensuring the infrastructure, energy resources, critical minerals, airports, and digital networks that require a greater military presence, all of which are very expensive.

It should be underlined that the war in the Ukraine and its resulting Western sanctions has forced Russia to redefine its trade routes and reorient its oil exports basically to China. It is to be expected that trade along the North Sea trade route will rise to the extent that Russia's dependence on China and their hydrocarbon sector cooperation will increase. This makes for more Russian control over the region and even a greater influence of China, a country with an enormous interest in using the North Sea route since it connects it to Europe. It should be underlined that Russia's foreign policy places Cen-



tral Asia and Eastern Europe above the North in terms of importance, given its intention to forge a Eurasian coastal power.

Some fear that China's growing technological and military capacity could significantly change the rules of the game in the Arctic, undoubtedly more and more accessible and navigable due to the impacts of climate change. This could largely influence the current race to locate, extract, and process critical minerals and vital rare earths for the technologies of the future.

All this seems to suggest that geopolitics has weakened the rivalry between the great powers in the Arctic, which of course requires answers from the United States but also constitutes a challenge for Canada. In this sense, Canada's defense minister, Bill Blair, recently recognized that Canada's Arctic sovereignty is increasingly being challenged by Russia and China. He therefore promised an important increase of the country's activities in the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The romantic invocations of Canada and their weight in the definition of its national identity seem to contradict the relative neglect of the defense of its residents, territory, and environment. In the coming years, we will see whether the alert in the face of Russian expansion in collaboration with China has generated changes in the strategy for Canada's Arctic, and also if a balance in the complex equation between environment and business has been achieved. **NM**